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Subject Juneau Empire: Alaska must take control of Bristol Bay
development

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Empire Editorial: Alaska must take control of Bristol Bay development

Feb. 26

A healthy balance is needed in all things.

Alaska needs oil exploration, mining and natural gas extraction, and the world needs our products. America also needs the useful minerals that exist in many regions of Alaska, including the proposed Pebble Mine, because many necessary materials such as molybdenum are extracted almost exclusively in remote or unfriendly countries.

We don't need to extract those things at the expense of ecological disaster and long-term damage to the land we love. Alaska needs a strong voice in the development of Bristol Bay, where a large mine with yet-unknown potential ecological impacts is under study and moving toward the permitting process.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency is studying the Bristol Bay watershed to determine the efficacy of allowing a large mining operation to operate in close proximity to Bristol Bay, indeed among the waters that feed the bay and in which Bristol Bay's salmon stocks breed.

We think the state of Alaska's elected representatives should have a strong say in any development that could affect the world's best fishing grounds. That's why we support Senate Bill 152, which gives the people we elect final say over whether a large mine – any large mine – situated only in that specific area will be safe enough to be allowed to receive permits.

The state Legislature already has authority over permits for oil and gas exploration in the unique and pristine waters of Bristol Bay. Senate Bill 152, currently before the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee, is a logical extension that gives the Legislature final say over whether any large-scale metallic sulfide mining operation is safe in that environment. Any operation, not just The Pebble Project.

This bill will not kill the Pebble Mine. It will give our state control of development in a specific

area, for a metallic sulfide mining operation that extracts metals including gold and copper from sulfide bearing rock and affects 640 or more acres of land. The rock that will become tailings from any mine in that area are considered toxic due to their natural composition and the chemicals they will leach.

The bill has no effect at all on existing mining operations.

It does not outlaw any mine at all.

It does demand that our elected representatives vote yea or nay on issuance of permits for large mines in the sensitive waters of Bristol Bay. We like the sound of that. Outside influences and multinational corporations increasingly seek control over Alaska's resource development, and our federal government places restrictions on so much of our state. This is one area where we should have the final say through our Legislature.

Alaska's natural resources aren't just counted in the volume of crude oil that flows from rigs on land and sea, and in the vast quantities of minerals used in industry. It's not just gold, silver, lime and coal that fire Alaska's economic engines.

This is a state where people utilize nature not as a museum, but as home, work and also a place to play.

Alaska's natural and economic abundance includes its fisheries, healthy waters that sustain fishing fleets, subsistence users and sport fishermen alike and sustain the wild creatures that also feed on salmon, groundfish and other marine life.

SB 152 is narrow in focus, brief and direct. It deserves bipartisan support in the house and senate and the full support of Alaska's governor. To oppose this bill is to oppose giving Alaska the loudest voice at the table on what is without question the most important natural resources issue to face this state since the discovery of oil.

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